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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESENTS CREDENTIALS, PRESSES FOR ANTI-DRUG VIGILANCE

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Marcia Bernicat for reasons 1.5 b/d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a series of meetings surrounding the presentation of her credentials to Bissau-Guinean President Joao Bernardo Vieira on November 6, 2008, Ambassador Bernicat pressed for continued vigilance in the fight against narco-trafficking and pledged U.S. engagement in the anti-drug effort. The Ambassador was accompanied on this trip by Political Counselor, the Guinea-Bissau Watcher, LEGATT and Assistant LEGATT, DAO, and RSO. Urging transparency and accountability, the Ambassador stressed that the United States and the international community stood ready to assist Guinea-Bissau in the fight against drug trafficking, but that the country had to work hard to overcome the perception that it is a narco-state. In the run-up to the November 16, 2008 national legislative elections, the capital city of Bissau was abuzz with campaign rallies and the news of President-elect Barack Obama's victory in the U.S. election. The Ambassador was joined by seven other ambassadors in a well-orchestrated set of presentation of credentials ceremonies. END SUMMARY.

Ambassador Urges Viera to Continue Anti-Drug Cooperation

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¶2. (C) On November 6, 2008, following the official ceremony of the presentation of her credentials, the Ambassador, accompanied by POLCOUNS, congratulated President Vieira on the July 2008 arrest of the Venezuelan pilot suspected of transporting narcotics into Guinea-Bissau and the subsequent seizure of the plane. The follow up investigation, she noted, served as a model for U.S. efforts and international cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. Nevertheless, the eventual release from custody of the pilot and the failure to confiscate any narcotics were evidence of the systemic problems facing Guinea-Bissau in its anti-drug effort, she observed. Guinea-Bissau's actions are currently under intense scrutiny, she added, and the international perception of the country becoming a narco-state far outweighs the reality of its few partial successes. The United States is prepared to increase its engagement in the counter-narcotics effort and stands ready to provide immediate operational support to Bissau-Guinean law enforcement officials, the Ambassador pledged. However, the government of Guinea-Bissau would need to demonstrate greater transparency and accountability before substantial equipment or material support could be forthcoming.

¶3. (C) After congratulating the Ambassador on the results of the U.S. election, President Vieira urged the U.S. to re-open its Embassy in Bissau as soon as possible. President Vieira acknowledged the systemic problems which hamper Guinea-Bissau's anti-narcotics efforts, and cited a need for greater training and resources to fight the drug traffickers.

The Secretary of State for International Cooperation, Ambassador Artur Silva, suggested that other countries in the region had a more serious drug trafficking problem, and encouraged the international community to support a regional response to the narcotics trafficking. The Ambassador agreed a regional approach was required, citing the interagency and international strategy being spearheaded by the U.S.

Department of State's Bureau of International Law Enforcement (INL). She disagreed with Silva that drug seizure statistics were an accurate measure of the volume of drugs being trafficked in Guinea-Bissau.

¶ 14. (C) In a previous meeting on November 5, 2008 with Silva, the Ambassador also applauded Guinea-Bissau's anti-drug efforts in July and August of 2008, while admitting disappointment with the results. In that meeting, Silva explained the release of the Venezuelan pilot as being a consequence of an independent judiciary. Tacitly acknowledging that a pending Interpol Red Notice should have been sufficient cause to hold the pilot, Silva noted that the judge who ordered the pilot's release had been suspended from the bench pending an investigation into possible corruption. Silva, educated in Brazil and London, also echoed a refrain heard from every Bissau-Guinean official with whom the Ambassador met: Guinea-Bissau lacks the resources to fight the drug traffickers.

Meeting with the Justice Ministry and Attorney General

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¶ 15. (C) At a lunch following the credentials ceremony on November 6, 2008, the Ambassador -- joined by the Ambassador

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from Canada and EMBOFFS -- praised Minister of Justice Carmelita Pires, Attorney General Luis Manuel Cabral, and Judicial Police Director Lucinda Ucharie, for their courageous efforts and emphasized that their important work was closely followed and appreciated in Embassy Dakar and in Washington, D.C. The United States and the international community were eager to support them in their dangerous task, the Ambassador assured them.

¶ 16. (C) In response, Pires acknowledged the failures and vulnerabilities of her government, while expressing hope in a nascent regional Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) plan to fight drug trafficking. Pires noted the delays inherent in the United Nations, bureaucracy highlight the importance of complimentary bilateral support. Pires insisted, however, that in order to effectively fight drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, the government and the donors needed to wage a holistic battle against poverty in the country. In order for such a battle to happen, the United States must first re-open its Embassy in Bissau, argued the Minister. In a private conversation during the lunch, the Ambassador re-iterated to Pires that greater transparency and accountability was needed before the United States could provide equipment, adding that if it was ever discovered that U.S.-provided equipment was being used to facilitate the trafficking of drugs, it would likely be the end of U.S. bilateral law enforcement assistance. (BIO Note: Pires is competing in the November 16 legislative elections in the Bissau constituency in which she was born and raised. While ministers are not required to hold legislative office, she would not speculate as to whether she would retain her portfolio in a new government. End BIO note)

Meeting with the Chief of the Armed Forces

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¶ 17. (C) In a meeting later on November 6, 2008, the Ambassador, accompanied by EMBOFFS, assured Bissau-Guinea Armed Forces Chief of Staff Tagme Na Wai that the United States was following intently events in the country and stood ready to assist Guinea-Bissau in their anti-drug efforts. She cautioned Na Wai, however, that the United States, along

with the rest of international community, had "doubts" about Bissau-Guinean armed forces involvement in drug trafficking. She noted that it was unlikely that former Navy Chief Bubo Na Tchuto, a long-suspected leading trafficker who apparently failed in a coup attempt in August, 2008, had facilitated the drug trade by himself. The Ambassador cautioned Na Wai that drug trafficking is an "animal" that cannot be controlled and that the U.S. goal is to help Guinea-Bissau avoid the fate of Columbia and Mexico.

¶8. (C) Na Wai, stone-faced and speaking in Creole, responded that Guinea-Bissau needs the West, in part because &only the West produces electricity, planes and boats. The armed forces of Guinea-Bissau are clean, he insisted early in their exchange, and are in no way involved with the drug trade. He stated that the armed forces simply lacks the means to combat the traffickers, comparing the country to a turtle who would like to dance, but lacks the ability. Na Wai observed that four months of salary arrears also impedes the military's ability to respond, while insisting that Guinea-Bissau needs international partners to help in the anti-narcotics fight.

¶9. (C) Na Wai stated that the downfall of Navy Chief Na Tchuto was fortuitous, and that if Na Wai had not intervened, the attempted coup might have been disastrous. In response to the international community's doubts raised by the Ambassador, Na Wai said that the West should "trust us." When pressed by the Ambassador that Na Wai had to build that trust and that the doubts of the donors must be addressed, Na Wai appeared to be taken aback and began to anxiously tap on the arm of the chair. He asked to know specifically to what doubts the Ambassador was referring. When the Ambassador responded that donors had little reason to believe Western-provided equipment and training would not be used by the traffickers, Na Wai appeared to relax, and reminded the Ambassador that he and his fellow soldiers had made great sacrifices dating back to the war of independence and that it would be shameful for those who had given their blood for their country to see Guinea-Bissau's reputation destroyed. He concluded with an appeal that the United States should trust him personally.

Meeting with the Prime Minister  
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¶10. (C) In a final November 6, 2008, meeting with Prime

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Minister Carlos Correia, the Ambassador repeated her praise for certain law enforcement efforts, while expressing disappointment over the eventual release of the Venezuelan pilot. She assured Correia that the United States and international community were ready to assist Guinea-Bissau in its anti-narcotics efforts. Correia noted that Guinea-Bissau neither produces nor consumes drugs and yet is victimized by the production and consumption of others. Like other interlocutors, Correia insisted that Guinea-Bissau lacks the means necessary to fight the drug traffickers.

Obama-mania  
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¶11. (SBU) Bissau, which is preparing for the November 16, 2008, legislative elections, was buzzing with campaign rallies, complete with fiery speeches, blaring music and legions of dancers. Political banners adorned every street and countless buildings, while cars and trucks draped in party logos patrolled the potholed streets imploring people on loud speakers to get out and vote. President-elect Obama's victory added to the palpable excitement, prompting cheers of "Obama!" from local residents, and messages of congratulations from the Ambassador's interlocutors, including a congratulatory letter from President Vieira (being sent septel).

¶12. (SBU) The long-delayed and much-requested presentation

of credentials included not only the U.S. Ambassador, but also ambassadors from Canada, the Congo, Turkey, India and the Vatican (based in Dakar) and from Egypt and Iran (based in Guinea-Conakry). Many of the Ambassadors had been waiting several months for an opportunity to present their credentials.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: The credential ceremony, a brief interview with the press and the subsequent meetings offered the opportunity to show support for law enforcement officials while putting senior officials on notice that their actions are being closely monitored in Washington and Europe. While officials were encouraged to take concrete steps to build confidence among the donor community in their counter-narcotics commitment, many disappointingly resorted to excuses for inaction, or in the case of Tagme Na Wai, a blanket appeal to, in his words, "trust me." Nevertheless, post remains hopeful that, armed with the knowledge that U.S. operational support is standing by -- and that material support is contingent on more concrete confidence-building measures -- senior Bissau-Guinean government officials will work with us to build upon their modest successes. END

COMMENT.  
BERNICAT